

Narratives of Modern Architecture: Learning at the intersection of cross-historical constructions

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of experimental course work in 2015 with second-year students at IE School of Architecture and Design under the auspices of Culture and Theory in Architecture I. The subject of the course is History of Modern Architecture. Importantly, this is the first contact IE students have with theory and history of architecture. One of the goals was to allow students to understand that history is not a monolithic object that stands before us ready-made, but a set multiple constructions in narrative form, hence necessarily a representation: a collection of stories, instead only one history. To accomplish this goal, the students were instructed to write their own particular narrative of a significative moment (building, design, event) in modern architecture.

Keywords: History, Modern Architecture, Narratives, Innovative teaching

Resumen

Este artículo muestra los resultados obtenidos en la docencia del curso de Cultura y Teoría en Arquitectura I durante el año 2015 en IE School of Architecture and Design. Este curso es el primer contacto de los alumnos con la teoría y la historia de la arquitectura, y su contenido principal fue la historia de la arquitectura moderna. Uno de los objetivos del curso ha sido hacer comprender a los alumnos que la historia no es un objeto monolítico que se encuentra ahí delante de nosotros para poder observarlo, sino un conjunto de múltiples construcciones que necesariamente tiene la forma de una narración. Es por tanto una representación. Para conseguir esto, se pidió a los alumnos que escribieran su propia historia de un momento significativo (un edificio, un proyecto, un acontecimiento) de la arquitectura moderna.

Palabras clave: Historia, Arquitectura Moderna, Narrativa, Innovación docente

1. Introduction

As is known from Aristotle on, fiction is not the invention of imaginary worlds. It is, rather, a structure of rationality: a form of presentation that makes perceptible and intelligible things, situations or events. It is a way of binding that produces forms of coexistence, of succession, and of causal chain between events, giving to those forms the character of the possible, de real, the necessary.¹

—Jacques Rancière

There is no such thing as “The History” (of Modern Architecture). There are only *histories*, plural, no caps. Or rather, there are only *stories*.

This statement, puzzling as it may seem, stands as the motto for the 2015-16 course on Culture and Theory in Architecture, second year, IE School of Architecture and Design, devoted, needless to say, to the history of modern architecture—its motto, its frontispiece, its tympanum, its, more aptly, fore-word. “More aptly” means that, even if the course will deal with architecture (modern architecture to be more precise) and with buildings and designs (but also books and pictures), it will be, nevertheless, squeezed, as any possible history is, into written form, or into a discourse using words. The intimate relation between writing and history (if not its coincidence, historiography meaning no other thing than “the writing of history”, its *inscription*) has a long genealogy, as long as history itself. So, it seemed plausible to recall this problem at the beginning of any such course.

Moreover, this fore-word gives the clue to the opening play between *History* and *stories*, acknowledging from the beginning that narrative techniques in writing, the ones used to produce stories, have a significant not to say decisive role when crossing the flimsy bridge that leads from stories to history and its production. Which means that, on the one hand, history is as constructed as stories are, and on the other that history has, necessarily, the form of a narration (even if the precise status of this narration is much discussed and or disputed). In the words of Michel de Certeau: “Historical discourse claims to provide a true content (which pertains to verifiability) but in the form of a narration” (De Certeau 1988, 93; note the articulation De Certeau introduces between facts and events and their telling.). Or, in the more radical writing of Hayden White: “I treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (White 1973, ix).

That said, the aim of this paper is less to engage in a lengthy discussion about the real status of history in general and history of architecture in particular—a task that inevitable will demand much more space and a different place²—than to show a pedagogical practice used to introduce

¹ Jacques Rancière (2014),

² The literature on the topic is generous; the debate as to what extent history is a science or—more likely—a discourse in written form has been lively since, say, the end of the 1960s after the publication of Roland Barthes's “The Discourse of History” (“Le discours de l'histoire”, published in French in 1967), followed then on both sides of the Atlantic. The foundational works should be credited to Paul Veyne (1971), Hayden White (1973) and Michel de Certeau (1975) (following Chartier). But the debate is still lively today, as Roger Chartier shows in “History, Time, and Space”, his 2011 essay on the challenges history faces today (and, in fact, in much of his work). Of course, many other important historians and scholars have contributed, from Paul Ricoeur to Carlo Ginzburg to Lynn Hunt. Moreover, the question of narratives and narrativity has a much wider scope, since it also refers to the ideological constructions (or narratives) that give support, consciously or not, to the writings of any historian, and in fact to the world-view constructions produced at any given moment and place. Postmodernism and the work of Lyotard precisely pointed to that, as is shown in *The Postmodern Condition* (originally published in French in 1979), where he identified the contemporary condition as that of the “end of grand narratives” and the dissemination into many minor ones. From this moment on, the whole field of cultural studies engaged in the topic. From the point of view of histories of modern architecture, the broader approach to narratives as ideological constructions has been consistently studied, from

young architectural students to the understanding of modern architecture and, specifically, to the problems of (the making of) its history. Of course some words on the epistemological status of history and its production in narrative discourse are needed to introduce and clarify the topic. So I will devote some space to it without any pretension of exhausting the topic. The point is to briefly explain how and why history is constructed; and how and why it is done in narrative form, as a story recounted by someone, and to introduce different arguments on how this can be possible, and its limits.

I will subsequently turn to the actual course on history of modern architecture as taught, for which I devised a specific device to engage the students as much as possible in the production of history and its specificities. This device, as the title of the paper suggests, consists in the production of a personal narrative that first approaches and then retells a particular moment in history of modern architecture. The aim is to give the students the possibility to participate in the construction of history in their own way, actively creating a frame in which research, understanding and writing are done, not as a mere recompilation of data, but as highly individual proposals that link architectural analysis with historical production. This will open the possibility to create, for every student, a personal approach to architecture and its history, endowing the work with distinct and especially lived meaning.

In the second part of the paper, then, I will explain in some detail the type of work assigned to the students and its outcome, quoting from some of the examples produced to understand the extent to which the aims have been fulfilled.

The main point of the paper being the dissemination of the experience developed by the students and the productivity of the method, it is nevertheless the excellent results obtained that I want to underline in the first place.

2. Telling history

History is not a monolithic object that stands before us and that can be, accordingly, recognized unproblematically by everyone as “true”. It is not a ready-made object that can be picked up and exposed as such to subsequent description, but a set of different stories, narratives, tales and constructions, that, although all of them ultimately are based in real facts, are nevertheless and necessarily representations, in the present, of something that happened in the past and that does not exist in this present as any thing other than a written or willed text. No ready-made object then, but a laboriously constructed one. History is, then, a representation that shares with mimesis some of its fundamental characteristics and procedures, but which parts company with it in a fundamental point: the model is not, and cannot be, present anymore—as to make any comparison possible. The representation, as any representation, has to be produced, construed. And it is done by way of a certain type of materialization, and by using certain types of tools and practices (the ones of history), drawn from a certain and specific place (society,

Panayotis Tournikiotis to Maria-Luisa Scalvini and Maria-Luisa Sandri to, more recently, Anthony Vidler. Yet probably not in the more restricted meaning I am working with in this paper. In any case, the articulations between both levels are constant and, in some cases, evident. Take Nikolaus Pevsner's seminal *Pioneers of Modern Movement* as example, where the ideological construction of the very concept of “pioneers”, which served to obscure many other trends and architectures also modern, was consistently deployed—or emploted—in a written style in which the epic narrative of these forceful giants had a significant role—an almost moral one (recalling Vasari perhaps). Or consider the recent history of modern architecture by Jean-Louis Cohen, entitled *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889*, which, maybe unconsciously, seems to propose modern architecture as almost inevitable, but in retrospect (which, by the way, effectively contradicts what he says in the text). Apart from that, it is worth noting the book written by Donald Preziosi on the construction of the history of art, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, which begins with the statement: “Art history is one of a network of interrelated institutions and professions whose overall function has been to fabricate a historical past that could be placed under systematic observation for use in the present” (Preziosi 2009, 7), a sentence that can perfectly be applied to modern architecture history.

institution, or moment in time as tool box). Finally, those “historical” materials should be given a written form, should be organized in a certain manner following a certain sequence to construct with them a particular argument, with certain objectives and aims, following a certain sequence. Almost surely this is done in the form of “classical” narration (no matter how deformed or made anew).

For many different historians and scholars—though not for all—this is the key element in writing history: that of narration. Or, and what is effectively the self-same, writing history is the articulation of the historical material under the structure of a plot that gives it a sense of plausibility that amounts to, no matter the form, a reliable meaning (emplotment). Nevertheless, there are many positions as to what amount (magnitude) of fictionality should be embedded in this narrative, and to what degree it maintains a relation or distance to the essential facts or events of the past. Too much fiction will mean erasing the reference to reality; whereas too little will weaken the structure to the point of getting lost *in* history. Or, to put it in a different way, the question will be to what extent history should be equated to fiction—and then to literature—or to science—in the sense of production of reliable knowledge (and this is not to say that fiction and literature do not produce knowledge). The debate has been lively since the 1970s for historians, and its development transcends both the limited scope of this paper and the strict field of professional history. Yet for our purposes, it can be approached in a very reduced form through the positions of three scholars that I’ll summarize succinctly. Those three meta-historians are: the American philosopher of history Hayden White; the French philosopher and phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur; and the French historian of religion Michel de Certeau. Their related, but ultimately very distinct positions serve well to define the boundaries of the frame in which the work of the students will move.

The most extreme position on behalf of the fictionality of history is here represented by Hayden White. For White, writing history means directly creating a fiction, using the tools of fiction to produce an account that is literary in itself.³ In that sense, writing history and writing fiction are not-so-distant activities, since the writing of history shares the same rhetorical figures, tropes and narrative structures as the writing of fiction—and not only in historical novels. For writing history, on the one hand, the historian emplots the events using archetypal forms of narration employed since ancient times for writing fiction: epic; romance; comedy; tragedy; satire; and so on. On the other hand, to produce the rhetorical character of the narration, tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony will be used (White 1973, 53ss; Gunn 2006, 31). The result is that a narrative order is imposed onto the past; one that will produce the desired explanation and—often enough (as in the case of propaganda)—the desired effect. The narrative orders the material (or materialization), and, through the articulation of it into a plot, produces a comprehensible image of the events. So, for White, history is essentially a literary creation, even if historians themselves are not always aware of it, because the important part is less the “reality” of the facts than the explanation of them, the meaning extracted after being narrated. For White, as meta-historian, this explanation can only be produced through literary means.

Moreover, and drawing from French theory of language from Barthes to Foucault and Derrida, White adopted those theories on discourse that stress the blurring of the difference between “real” and “fictional” referents: language being only a free play of signifiers, meaning arising only

³ White focuses mainly in nineteenth century fiction writing, as his main work (White 1973) also focuses on the classic historians of this century: Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt. But it should also be noted that fictions and novels underwent radical changes in modernity, and even if White acknowledges that, he does not engage in the discussion of this transformation of narrative articulation and material techniques in full. For a recent and illuminating reading of this change see Jacques Rancière, *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction*. The English title is somewhat misleading, since in the original French the subtitle is “Essai sur le fiction moderne”.

as the unending interchangeability of them, without being fixed in a stable signified. This means that the ontological distinction between the reference outside the language and meaning inside it is erased, and what rests is only discourse (White 1989, x). Or, in other words, history is necessarily fictional because there exists no clear distinction on the “inside” of language between the two supposedly different types of referents (“fictional” and “real”), both being irreducibly internal to discourse: there is only text.

For the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, history, even when fundamentally narrative, pertains to a different species than fiction, and refers directly to the world outside of language. Since his approach comes from philosophy, rather than history itself, his engagement with the writing of history is fundamentally mediated by his understanding of the human experience of meaning. His background being phenomenological and hermeneutical, Ricoeur addresses the construction of personal identity as narrative identity, as the explanation one can find in the recounting of his or her own acts (for which the individual has a responsibility). In that sense, as he points out just at the beginning of Volume One of his monumental work, *Time and Narrative*, he analyzes the relation between both concepts in historical writing, “[T]ime becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (Ricoeur 1984, 3). This intimate link between human time and narrative concerns the “reality” of experience, or, concerns history, as the connection between the events that really happened and the understanding of them. True, this understanding only can happen in narrative form, which led him to consider, following Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the emplotment of events as the essential activity of historical writing, since it links together the different pieces in a coherent whole. Contrary to White, for Ricoeur historical truth exists, distinct from the truth we can find in novel or poetry (Gunn 2006, 37), and a direct link is established between the narrative and what it recounts, since this is the precondition for the existence of the narrative.

In any case, history for Ricoeur is necessarily a representation, a re-enactment of the traces of the past in the present, and this character of representation makes history not directly accessible as such, but only through reproduction (requiring a subject). History needs reconstruction, and this reconstruction can only be organized through mimesis. Following again Aristotle, Ricoeur develops a complex three-stage temporal process through which mimesis organizes the relation between narrative, time and reality in its temporalization (simplifying the three steps are: prefiguration / configuration / refiguration). This allows him to untangle the temporal complexities of the narrative structure to produce a coherent historical meaning. Mimesis as proposed by Ricoeur creates a fundamental analogical or metaphorical relation that links the narration to the reality (Gunn 2006, 38), allowing the separate fields of events and their telling to mirror themselves in a complex mimetic way.

Michel de Certeau developed his ideas on history in its most detailed form in a book published in French in 1975 (English translation 1988) aptly entitled *The Writing of History*. Of course, as for White and Ricoeur, for de Certeau history is a practice too, one that is developed in writing as a narrative. But the emphasis here should be put on the word *practice*, rather than on the word *narrative*. Practice means that the making of history is something more than its mere writing, the emplotment of past events into a coherent form, but a whole set of particular operations that distinguishes history from any other type of discourse, and one that involves society as a whole.

This practice transforms the given into a construct, consequently building “representations with past materials” (De Certeau 1988, 6), and accordingly produces a tabulated set of procedures that guarantee its reliability. As quoted at the beginning of this article, de Certeau points to the

verifiability of the narration, establishing a clear link between the two spheres of discourse and events. As he states: "Historiography (that is, 'history' and 'writing') bears within its own name the paradox—almost an oxymoron—of a relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse. Its task is one of connecting them and, at the point where this link cannot be imagined, of working as *if* the two were being joined" (De Certeau 1988, xxvii). The "as if" here being the impossible-necessary connection between the facts and their telling; it stands for the presence as absence of the other, that in this way is included. This other of the discourse is here the existing material findings—the chronicle, the archive, the document—which being neither the events nor its plot have nevertheless the agency of connecting them in a kind of laminated discourse that can reveal what the evidences are signifying (De Certeau 1988, 94).

As such, accepting that the making of history is a practice widens the scope of the inquiry to include the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural context. Society provides space for this production, permitting the putting into play of a set of specifically disciplinary procedures that result in the historiographical operation: a *place* from which it can be produced (the institutional context: the *milieu*), different analytical *procedures* (the tools of the discipline) and the construction of a *text* (a literature) (De Certeau 1988, 57). But it also imposes its own constraints, ideological prejudices, particular interests and so on. In that sense, the work of the historian is essentially mediated, and even in some ways collectively construed, since it depends not only on the preconditions existing in the place in which he is working, but also on the recognition of the work as valuable by the very institutional frame to which it is addressed (and that selects which historical knowledge is pertinent and what is not).

Finally, for de Certeau history (or the making of) maintains its scientific character at least in part (Chartier 2011, 3), since as a practice it involves the construction of the historical object according to some defined procedures (treatment of sources, reliability of research, construction of hypothesis, processes of verification...) and under an ensemble of verifiable rules that control the result and guarantees its universal validity. History, then, combines two types of knowledge; that of the scientific (rationalist) conventions and that of the narrative (literary) discourse (Gunn 2006, 44).

3. Producing history; or the narratives of Modern Architecture

What seems clear now is that history needs to be construed, since it is necessarily a representation; and that this representation involves the use of narrative devices to make it come to life again (even if, by definition, these narratives are past—or, "no more"). Accordingly, this also implies that there cannot be only one possible account, only one narration ("authorized," as is often said), but many different histories (stories), some of them contemporary—to the moment in which they are read. And some of them not, yet which offer different perspectives and interpretations of what happened. It is not only that history as a practice (following de Certeau) is an unending work, since the place from which it is produced will necessarily change in time, nor that always new material can be uncovered through research, or be newly assessed such that it will lead to a re-evaluation of the existing plots, but, instead, that, as story, there cannot a narrative structure, singular or otherwise, that gives a full account (maybe with the exception of Borges, precisely because his narration as in "The Library of Babel").

There cannot be any possible transparency to history—the construction—that allows us to see the history—the past events. There is only distance—a filter, or a veil, that is needed to "see" and materialize this past. This veil is the tale that the historian tells; the narrative so construed that

the unveiling via veil becomes uncanny. There is always a gap, necessary and impossible to fill, between what happened—the events—and their representations—the narrative constructions of the historian that try to give them a meaningful structure. One of the labors of the historian is to fill these gaps (with flashes of insight, *pace* Walter Benjamin, but “as if” these flashes have semi-independent agency). This process of structuralization leaves space for the imagination (the Imaginary), since, as de Certeau proposes, it is semi-reliability rather than certainty that historians might achieve. Filling the gaps is not necessarily inventing a fiction, as inventing a novel (*pace* Borges); but it is producing plausible narratives that can explain precisely those scattered remnants that demand interpretation and re-interpretation. And this is exactly what I proposed the students to do. To use the tools of fiction to re-create plausible narratives, backed, of course, by research that would allow them to understand, by themselves, that which can only be understood through the fictional construction of a narrative. Fiction is, then, not the diminishing word applied to novels, but the structure of rationality that allow us, as humans, to produce meaning, to understand the texture of the real. And this is what the students will explore: how and why such possibility is not a mere possibility, but an ontological demand.

To accomplish this goal, I devised an artifact called “Narratives of Modern Architecture”. During the span of the course, the students, apart from having historical and theoretical lectures and reading key texts, had to develop a long essay (3,500 words), the personal Narrative of Modern Architecture, to be submitted at the end. The format was to be an A5 booklet. In addition, they were instructed to make an in-class dramatized presentation of the content (to perform it). Finally, with the different booklets produced from the personal essays, a printed book would be produced (in process as of late August 2016), with introductions and design coming from voluntary students.

The personal narrative(s) will comprise two different approaches (two synthesized narratives) to a particular work pertaining to the history of modern architecture (a built architecture, an un-built design or utopian proposal or a written text or book) that the student will choose, having in mind that one narrative needs to be contemporary with the selected work and the other with the time in which the student is writing. The main condition for the production of the personal narratives is that the different “histories” produced have to be *as pertinent as the existing ones* (they should be reliable). In constructing them, the students will be familiarized with a particular historical context, which should be understood in depth (insertion in the breadth of contemporary architecture, study of stylistic traits, relation with other contemporary designs of the same architect or others when studying particular designs, identification of main theoretical ideas at work, reception by other architects and scholars, conditions of production with especial attention to the study of the social, political and economic context, personal stories of the architects, biographical data and so on), in a kind of deep transversal cut through the historical moment. The students need also to develop a critical position about the importance of a particular work seen in its historical perspective, putting it into the broader architectural sequence that followed. This will allow the student to connect in a synchronic and in a diachronic way relevant works of modern architecture with broader architectural and cultural themes in an all-encompassing way.

3.1 The production of narratives

3.1.1. First narrative

The student will produce a first narrative in which s/he will approach the chosen case study as if s/he were a contemporary character to the moment in which the work was produced.

The student should take the decision about “who” is going to speak in the narrative—the so-called voice. The key word here is “impersonation”, since the student should act “as if” he or she were a different person. The voice could be an existing one or a fully invented one; but in both cases it needs to consider what this contemporary character can and cannot know, to what information s/he might have access, and what his or her mind frame is, considering the culture, society and historical moment in which s/he lives. Deciding who is speaking also implies selecting the audience, the rhetorical devices to be used, the media to publish the writing and so on. (Awakening in the time of the project’s conception, the student oddly becomes an entity not dissimilar to a time traveler, while the more adventurous might become something akin to Kafka’s cockroach *and* a time traveler.)

The narrative should act, *pace* de Certeau, as and “as if”, yet it should have the freedom to explore the limits of the fictionality and/or scientific rationality of the proposal or built project, and access the level at which the mimetic program is carried out (architectural “mimesis” defined as above). They have, then, to take decisions about the actual relation between events and their telling, between the past and the structure of intelligibility applied, retrospectively, through the emplotment of the series of events. And they have to take a decision on how to make visible, in the present, these historical events so as to have relevance today.

3.1.2. Second narrative

The second approach, in a sense, reverses the dynamism of the first one. Now, they are asked to act as real students of architecture living in the present-day, instructed by the teacher to produce a critical re-evaluation of the previously studied work of architecture. They should provide a coherent critical narrative from the historical moment of the case study till now. Of course, this implies a different treatment of the available material, since the access to the real events is now forbidden, yet later critical work (inclusive of so-called historical-critical texts, plus subsequent works influenced directly and indirectly by the project under study) is of use. Indeed, it signals historicity proper, a somewhat spectral domain but also an important diachronic-synchronic plenitude actually behind architectural and critical appropriations.

3.2 Outcome

As might be expected, the approach the different students took to the building of the narratives has been variegated, some of them taking more risks than others, but truly positive on the whole. The field of the topics proposed ranged from well-known buildings or events (Weissenhof Siedlung, Aalto’s Paimio Sanatorium) to the more personal and/or local (modern architecture in Casablanca, Carlos Raul Villaneva’s Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas) to the more theoretical and complex (the writings of El Lissitzki in Russia, the “Situationist affaire” of Henry Lefebvre). In some cases, the topics were directly linked with the nationality of the students, since in a group of twenty-two students there were ten different nationalities. This also granted many students access to readings in other languages (English, French, Spanish, but also Russian, Portuguese or Hungarian), which then allowed for the “collective” incorporation of not-so-easily accessible and readable documents.

Let’s review three examples.

María Moreno Repiso chose to study an apparently obvious topic; Aalto’s Paimio Sanatorium. Yet what was surprising was the selection of the voice of the narratives. Her first narrative, the one contemporary to Aalto and the building, was narrated through the eyes of a young female architect, friend of Aalto and Ainio, who, after being diagnosed with tuberculosis, was confined

to the newly built sanatorium. Then, in a very intelligent diaristic manner written while in Paimio, she explained from the inside, with the eyes of both an architect *and* a patient, the qualities of the construction, unveiling for us an existentially rich account of how life was to be lived there, and describing the novelties of the design in both a functional and aesthetical way. This strategy also permitted Maria Moreno to extend her research to the social conditions of contemporary Finland, and place the building in the broad cultural place from which it grew. The first narrative begins as follows:

My name is Rebekka Marie Linna, I was born in the 4th of January 1902. Born and raised in Turku, Finland. Since I was a little girl I always dreamed of following my father's steps as an architect and so I did. As a matter of fact, I graduated top of my class and with this I begin the story of my life...

I find Finland a beautiful country, and what I like most about it is how green it is. Unfortunately, this was not as beautiful during my country's civil war in 1917 after it became an independent republic separated from Russia. My grandparents and their parents worked in the field, they were agrarians, as most of the population in the 19th century. In fact, we could say that at this time about 70% of the Finn population was agrarian.

To follow, after elaborating on the socio-economic *milieu* and national health issues, she continues in this way:

In fact, you must be wondering why am I telling you this. Well, in fact this health situation and most specifically the Paimio Sanatorium is so important for me because just some weeks ago I had to be taken due to tuberculosis. This horrifying disease has not only affected my family and friends but now also myself.

Due to the health situation in which the Finnish society is going through there have been many construction of sanitariums through out the whole country. Just some years ago, in autumn of 1929, a competition for the construction of a new Sanatorium in Paimio took place. The most interesting part is that one of my closest friends resulted winner of this intense competition who's jury was Bernhard Heikkilä, Jussi Paatela and Väinö Vähäkollio.

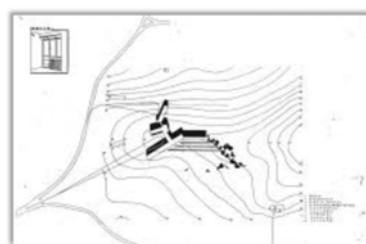
My dear friend Alvar Aalto and her wife Aino moved to Turku, my home city about two years ago. We met thanks to others architects who gathered around every now and then to speak and talk about their avant-garde ideas. Alvar turned out to be very interested in these "new concepts" and surprisingly; they were very influential for them. He has shown me previous work he had done and was more of a "Nordic classicism" architecture.

In fact, you must be wondering why am I telling you this. Well, in fact this health situation and most specifically the Paimio Sanatorium is so important for me because just some weeks ago I had to be taken due to Tuberculosis. This horrifying disease has not only affected my family and friends but now also myself.



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Once I got there, I was surprised about how immersed in the forest is actually was, in the drive, I calculated it was approximately 3 km away from the center of Paimio. Turns out, after some years I found out that the Sanatorium was in the middle of this dry pines forest for "isolation" from the community, this was a way of preventing further active population and to manage the specific medical conditions we needed. This location was strategically chosen for tuberculosis to be cured it was important that the ground soil was dry, therefore the ground must contain gravel or sand for the rain water to drain.



As a matter of fact, the buildings were bigger than expected and there were more than one. We can find the main building in the center. We also see the Head physician's house, the junior physician's row house, the staff row house, the Rose Cellar (chapel), hospital morgue, boiler and machine room.

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Fig. 1 María Moreno Repiso. Image of two pages of the final booklet.

The second narrative, more conventional, has as its starting point this same (now old) diary, yet found in an attic *today* (a classic fictional device). It produced a more objective account of the afterlife of the building. Although the character was fictional, the description and interpretation of the building and its novel design could have been real, and allowed María to put together many different types of information in an unconventional way to produce a different and illuminating vision.

Naomi Njonjo initially suggested to approach the writings of Henri Lefebvre, especially *The Production of Space*, trying to understand the broader social, political, and economic context in which modern architecture developed in the 1950s. Soon after beginning work on the topic, she visited the Constant exhibition at the Museo Reina Sofía (October 21, 2015 through February 29, 2016). This provided connections between Lefebvre and the Situationists. Then she re-oriented the narratives, trying to understand both Lefebvre's thinking and Constant's proposals for New Babylon as mutually interdependent. She developed a first narrative in which afictionalized chat between Henri Lefebvre and a friend takes place sitting in a brasserie by the Seine. (What we read, in fact, is a section from the autobiography of Lefebvre's imaginary interlocutor.) The event happened just after Lefebvre returned from a trip to the Netherlands, where he visited the Constant exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum (The Hague, 1974). This artifice allowed the student to offer an insightful vision not only of Lefebvre's short-lived involvement with late-1950s' Situationism, but a much more mature evaluation of major Constant work in New Babylon, made after Lefebvre's disconnection from the group. And, especially, to essay a practical application of Lefebvre's ideas in a rigorous context. This is how Naomi begins her essay:

"Extract from Catherine Lemans' Autobiography:

We were walking to find a brasserie where we could have lunch by the Seine, when Henri told me about his visit to the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag exhibition during his last trip to the Netherlands.

HL: I was absolutely amazed by the rich content of this exhibition. It was a once in a life time opportunity to encounter Constant's most brilliant work. You know I worked with him and the Situationists for a while, so I knew about this project prior to the exhibition. However, I had never realized he had achieved so much and with so many experimentations throughout those years. I should have guessed you might say; when you spend twenty years of your life working on a project, you should have quite a bit of content to share with the world by the end of it.

Probably the best part of it was how well the space was organized for a full and concise understanding of his work. You could walk around the various models, paintings and drawings and it was as if they took your hand and guided you through the evolution of Constant's thoughts and ideas. In general, this allowed me to think back on questions around the idea of space, the social one, which I want to discuss with you.

How much do you think you know about the New Babylon project?

CL: A bit...

HL: I see. Well you do know that Constant is a visual artist?

CL: Right.

HL: So how would you say a visual artist finds himself spending twenty years of his life dedicated to what is now the most extensive analysis of the city and urban space?"

The second, contemporary narrative begins with a question proposed to imaginary students in an imaginary class: "How can architects radicalize their methodologies now and in the future to improve urban communities?" This served, then, to launch an actualized reading of Constant and Lefebvre, and their relevance today, expanding the context to include, for example, an extension toward recent ecological concerns in direct relations with overdevelopment.

Abel's personal notes

Dec 3rd 2015,

Today in class we got this question as the basis for an essay: how can architects radicalize their methodologies now and in the future to improve urban communities? Broad question... yeah I know. One of those where the answer I want to give seems like common sense to me, though I know things are always more complex than they appear.

I still cannot put a finger on the reasons why, but the subject of this essay has fascinated me for the past few days. I still have not started my essay but the research I have done has been incredibly enlightening.

In regards to the question I would like to point out that to answer it, or outline an attempt of that, it is important to understand the terms urbanism and urban planning. Before starting my research I pretty much assumed that they were just two different ways of talking about the same thing. Now, if I understood the definition properly, urbanism is more about the characteristics of life within a city, taking into account all aspects of the urban life¹, whereas urban planning or city planning, is the designing and arranging of spaces within a community to improve the present condition². For this reason, urban planning has to take into account the constructions process with legal and financial requirements.

With this in mind, the architect as such and the urban planner are not the same people; though for them to work together in an interdisciplinary manner is essential if we ever want to get anywhere. During the past century, we witnessed a time of revolutionary ideas regarding the modern life and the architecture that would hold it. At the time, most architects played this dual role of designers and urban thinkers. If we look at project ssuch as the *Ville Radieuse* (1955 – 1960) by Le Corbusier or the *Broadacre city* (1952) of Frank Lloyd Wright, we can see that the urban issue was a key aspect of the development of the modernist architecture throughout the years.



Le Corbusier, maquette of the project "ville radieuse" (1935)



Frank Lloyd Wright, Drawing of "Broadacre City" (1956)

It is funny to think that, and this is definitely subjective, the best and still most relevant attempt to design a modern city is the New Babylon project explored by visual artist Constant Nieuwenhuys. Nevertheless, it is important to give some credit to all the architects from the past century that made an attempt to combine an urbanistic approach with architecture as a mean of creating a better society. This was indeed a big part of the architectural modern world.



Constant Nieuwenhuys, view on New Babylon

Constant once said 'I do not design, I challenge, I make proposals. The form of the New Babylon is not fixed, only the idea'.³ How smart is this statement? And the state of mind he had, implying that what he started is just the starting point of something that could be much bigger and more defined. I mean, it took him twenty years to develop this project, to in the end decide that that was all he could bring but expecting his work to serve as a future reflection. Brilliant! And in the end, we can clearly see that a lot of the debate happening right now around how architecture and design have an impact on the city of the future, is based on his work.

Constant's work dealt with a lot of relevant aspects when it comes to design considerations for the city. I personally want to concentrate on the idea of flexibility and the possibility of change that is to be found in his project. I have been wondering if it would not be worth it to explore this flexibility in the very design and construction process of building but also

Fig. 2 Naomi Njonjo. Image of two pages of the final booklet.

The third example I want to review moves toward a more, say, phenomenological approach. Romain Odin Lepoutre became fascinated with Pierre Chareau's *Maison du Verre* and decided to investigate it closely. The artifice here again is, of course, establishing a fiction. He invented an old man, Michel Michelin, a retired mason who happened to live nearby a courtyard in Paris in the 1930s where a strange construction was underway. The narrative consists of a series of letters to himself in which Michelin describes his fascination with the house, with the process of construction, the materials and so on, and how he invented a pretext to be invited to the house (he scheduled an appointment for Dr. Dalsaces' clinic). The account of this visit to the building is detailed, putting a lot of care into describing the novelty of the details and the spatial experience he felt through his limited perambulation, and is especially sensitive, almost atmospheric, in its narration. Somehow you can feel, touch, see the building through Michelin's tale; one that is nevertheless anchored in the possible experience of a common worker in those year's in France. In addition, Romain produced carefully detailed drawings attributed to his character, and added some snapshots (that were existing pictures but transformed through reframing, filtering and other procedures to highlight Michelin's experience).

For the second narrative, Romain chose to “explain” the first-person, individual, account of the house in a more scholarly way. Now we are confronted with what Michel Michelin saw, but explained “objectively”. Hence we have a description and critique of those spaces, those details, those materials, which so much called the attention of Michel Michelin, but set into their subsequent historical context, explaining Maison du Verre’s achievements (and its faults) in a very professional way.

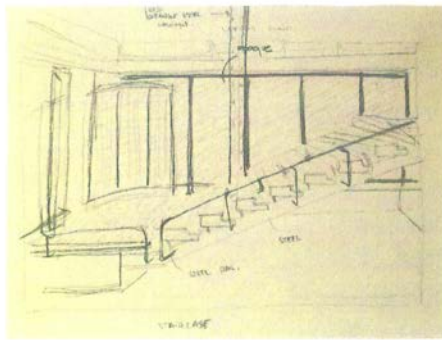


photograph before start of construction

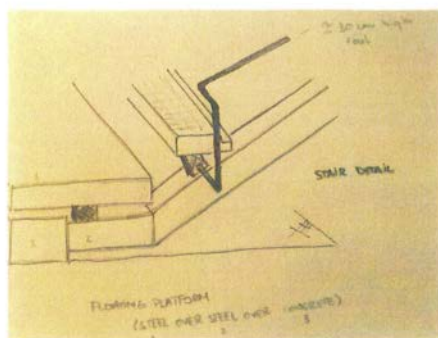
09.07.1932
A LITTLE VISIT TO THE EXTERIOR

This façade was something I had never seen before in Paris, nowhere else actually, not that I've visited much places besides my parents in the South. Who could I blame, I am too lazy of a man to get out of this city anyway. The façade seemed to be made out of translucent glass, similar to what you could find in an underground parking slab's opening, or a bathroom. It is unique, as a façade at least; I am wondering why the architect has chosen this particular circular pattern. The façade was slightly sticking out of the existing old building; it was not too imposing, and was just a little shove to show that this house was new. It is not trying to stick out, the focus is entirely given to the glass, not to mention the marvelous steel frame that holds it. As I took a closer look to the interior, I noticed this doorbell that had 'Visitors' and 'Doctor' labelled on it. I did see some people entering the house a few days ago during my afternoon stroll. I think there may be a possibility for me to visit this interior, but no health issues seem to be surfacing at the moment...I'll think of something. I do remember my knee twitching a few times last week, that's worth a check right? Of course it is Michel!

Fig. 3 Romain Odin Lepoutre. Image of two pages of the final booklet.



other side of staircase, with detail of connections



approximated plan with location where sketches were made

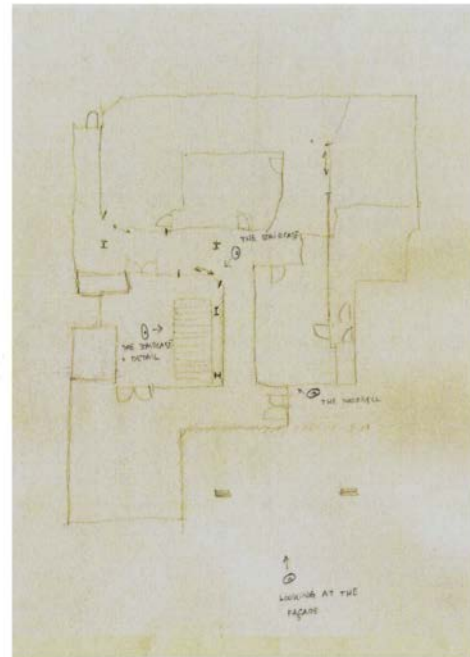
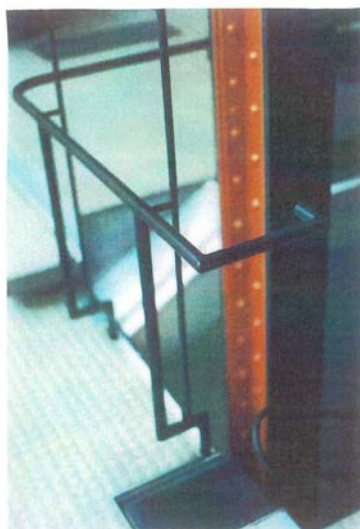


Fig. 4 Romain Odin Lepoutre. Image of two pages of the final booklet.



detail of the railing and the orange vif coated column

09.08.1992
POST VISIT

They have told me that I am free to visit any day I desire to, as a patient or a friend. It has been a great experience for me. I got to see something that not much people will have the opportunity to during the life of this family and house. This house will forever fascinate me and I give a tremendous amount of respect to the team that has built the Maison de Verre - that is how Chareau has named it. I will come visit them one day, sooner rather than later. Who knows, they might even show me the third floor. I best not get too excited about it!

Fig. 5 Romain Odin Lepoutre. Image of two pages of the final booklet.

4. Conclusion

Of course it might be said that history cannot be reduced to narratives, and that narratives cannot be reduced to the mere emplotment of actions or that they have to be extended to a broader ideological context, and that the scientific labor of other historians (e.g., the quantitative data-based Annales School associated with Fernand Braudel) should be considered as a more legitimate way to write history. Or even that the history of architecture is a different thing than history in general, since the objects with which it deals, and especially in the context of architectural pedagogy, deserve an analysis that is not mainly historical but “architectural” (spatial, technical, compositional, and so on). All of this may be true, yet it can be argued to the contrary as well.

Nevertheless, the point is mainly to prove the operativity, in the context of education, of the approach taken. If the students were confronted with the necessity of ordering the material found in their research in a unique manner, at the least rote research, all too common today, was assiduously avoided. The presence of the subjective (the voice) is the first order of business in producing scholarship. Confronted the students with the necessity of ordering the material found in their research in a way that is unique, the mere compilation of data and the re-writing of existing texts, found in the internet, cannot be used as a strategy. The creation of the narrative devices noted demanded an understanding of the topic studied, of its history and context, of the critical reception and of its relevance today. In other words, the strategy of the narrative methodology developed a proto-historical voice by which a meaningful account of a particular moment, period, or work of architecture may speak.

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